

From: [Assunto, Carmen](#)
To: [Hayes, Mark](#); [Moore, Gary](#); [Delgado, Paige](#); [Foster, Althea](#); [Delgado, Eric](#); [Webster, Susan](#); [McQuiddy, David](#)
Subject: State official offers theory on West explosion: a rail car with ammonium nitrate
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<http://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/State-official-offers-theory-on-West-explosion-a-4453471.php>

AUSTIN - The chairman of the [Texas Commission on Environmental Quality](#) raised the idea Monday that the explosion at a fertilizer plant that devastated the tiny town of West may have stemmed from a rail car reportedly loaded with ammonium nitrate.

"I would submit to you that the ammonia tank that's been a lot of people's focus was likely not what we saw exploding there," TCEQ Chairman [Bryan Shaw](#) said at a forum sponsored by the [Texas Tribune](#).

"It's more likely - as I've done some analysis of that - that it's likely possibly a rail car with ammonium nitrate in it," Shaw said. "That's early, early - just looking at some of the visual studies."

Shaw said identifying what caused the explosion will let officials know how to take action to prevent a similar tragedy from happening again.

He contended that while there have been news articles contending this was a failure of environmental regulation, that the environmental agency doesn't have the safety responsibility.

He said that belongs to the Office of the Texas State Chemist and [Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration](#). He said he understood that the Office of the Texas State Chemist had visited the facility 12 times last year.

The New York Post has reported that a White House official said the explosion may have been set off by a fire reaching ammonium nitrate in a rail car that was on, or adjacent to, the fertilizer facility's property. Ammonium nitrate can explode when detonated.

The [West Fertilizer Co.](#) stored anhydrous ammonia, [the Associated Press](#) has reported.

After the forum, Shaw said he's not aware of any time in which there has been an anhydrous ammonia tank that created such a boiling liquid, expanding vapor explosion.

Shaw also said he had seen on the site "a railroad car that is turned over and is reportedly loaded with, or was loaded with, ammonium nitrate."

He said he didn't know whether there was a second railroad car.

Shaw said that looking at aerial photos of where the blast originated, "that seems to be over in the area of where there could potentially have been a railroad car and/or in the bulk material storage area."

Shaw said he isn't aware of instances in which there has been an ammonium nitrate explosion

when the material is "bulk-stored, where it's not contained. ... You don't just throw a match on it and it blows up. You need to have containment. ... Just a pile of ammonium nitrate if you light it, it's going to burn and cause issues, but it's not going to explode. And so there's something unusual here, and that's why I don't want to speculate and say yes, it's a rail car. But I want to say it appears that that's something else going."

Asked about his comment at the forum about the likelihood of it possibly being a rail car with ammonium nitrate, Shaw said, "I'm not an expert on this. I've got history with safety issues and other things." He said he hadn't asked others to speculate.

He emphasized that his comment was based largely on his own observation of before-and-after aerial photographs of the facility and a video of the explosion, and his thoughts about what may have occurred.

"It appears it was not the anhydrous ammonia tanks, and it appears to be in an area where they might be unloading those materials, and those materials have been known to be explosive," Shaw said. "So I don't want to start chasing that or making people focus on that too much, because if that's not the case, if it wasn't sitting there, we still need to discover what it was."

Shaw said he believes there was nothing his agency could have done to prevent the tragedy. He also said he has not heard anything to suggest it was intentionally caused and said it seems highly unlikely that it was "anything other than a tragic accident."